

China, Vietnam and the islands dispute: What is behind the rise of Chinese nationalism?

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February 2, 2011 — *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — Over the last year or so, tensions have been heightened in the dispute over two island groups in the South China Sea (also known as the East Sea in Vietnam), involving rival claims to some or all of the islands by Vietnam, China, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Philippines and even Brunei. The first three of these countries claim all of both island groups.

The islands in question are known in English as the Paracels and the Spratlys, in Vietnamese as the Hoang Sa and Truong Sa, and in Chinese as the Xisha and the Nansha. Both island groups are uninhabited rocky islands and reefs; there is neither a Vietnamese population oppressed by the current Chinese occupation of the Hoang Sa nor a Chinese population oppressed by Vietnamese rule over most of the Truong Sa. Thus there are no questions of self-determination of actual peoples. Therefore, international law would seem to be the best way to judge the status question, unless further negotiations settle things differently.

Since international law is on the side of Vietnamese sovereignty, as will be shown below, this article will use the Vietnamese terms Hoang Sa and Truong Sa for the sake of simplicity. The Hoang Sa are the more northerly group, approximately equidistant from the central coast of Vietnam to their west and the far south Chinese island of Hai Nam to their north (hundreds of kilometres from both); the Truong Sa are far south of this, nowhere near China, off the south central coast of Vietnam but also a similar distance to the closest points in Malaysia in the south and the Philippines in the east.

At the outset, however, I wish to stress that the actual question of sovereignty is less important than the differing ways that China and Vietnam have treated the issue. Indeed, if someone were to say to me, “What does it matter who legally owns a bunch of rocky, uninhabited islands? Surely the dispute is about potential oil deposits underneath. The surrounding countries should jointly exploit them and share the potential wealth if it is shown to exist, or perhaps leave the regional environment alone”, I would say, “I agree completely.”

But I believe the Vietnamese government has a better stance, separate to my own sympathies, and its correctness is based on international law. Because the Vietnamese government is opposed to the militarisation of the conflict, believes that the defence of uninhabited islands can only be carried out

diplomatically and that it is not worth a single soldier's life. Vietnam clearly lacks the military power to enforce its rights anyway.

By contrast, the Chinese government does have the means to militarily enforce its imperial designs and is doing so aggressively. Its policy has consisted of military aggression, in 1956, 1974 and 1988, to seize the islands, and in recent years its growing militarisation of the dispute and aggressive actions towards Vietnamese people, mostly poor fisherfolk, on these seas, is pushing a confrontation regardless of what one thinks of the worth of fighting over the islands' status. In the last few years, China has:

- moved its war fleet into both groups of islands as a permanent fixture, with activities that include mass kidnapping of Vietnamese fisherfolk for ransom
- declared that the two island groups now occupy the same strategic position in China's international affairs as do Taiwan and Tibet, that is, something close to a declaration of war on Vietnam
- created a new province in southern China incorporating the two island groups.

To make this clear, it is well worth examining the gravity of this situation. In 2010, Chinese society was mobilised in a nationalistic paroxysm against Japan when just one Chinese captain was detained by the Japanese navy in another island group that is disputed between China and Japan. The nature of China's aggression in the Hoang Sa and Truong Sa – and the extraordinary level of double standards shown by Beijing – was captured vividly in this piece by Greg Torode in the *South China Morning Post* in reference to this other issue with Japan [\[1\]](#):

"With apologies to John Lennon, imagine that the Chinese fishing trawler captain now in detention in Japan was not a lone individual, but one of several hundred fishermen captured and held over the past 18 months or so. Imagine, too, that some of their boats had been rammed and sunk by Japanese patrols; others, meanwhile, had their catches seized.

Or that once in detention, at times for months, Japan had offered their release only after the payment of thousands of dollars per head. Their government objected to the payment of ransoms, but some families were so desperate to see their fathers, sons and husbands that they quietly paid up. Rumours spread that some had been shot.

I put such a scenario to a mainland student friend. He was shocked. "I cannot even imagine the outcome", he said. "There would be such anger against the Japanese government that I cannot believe that ordinary Japanese would be safe in China". Certainly it does not bear thinking about, given the feverish pitch to the diplomatic and social pressure now building on Tokyo over the continued detention of the captain.

Yet this scenario has happened, but not involving Japanese patrols against Chinese fishing boats over the disputed islets of the East China Sea. Instead, it represents the actions taken by Chinese vessels in the disputed South China Sea against Vietnamese fishermen. Instead of the Diaoyu Islands, most of the detentions have taken place in waters surrounding the Paracel archipelago – claimed by both countries but occupied by China since 1974.

Vietnam's Foreign Ministry has lodged formal protests while its state press, a less sophisticated but equally unsubtle variant of the mainland model, has churned out tales of woe from grieving relatives waiting for news. Under pressure from annoyed Chinese diplomats, Vietnamese government officials have tried to keep nationalistic tensions from spilling over into street protests."

This description is accurate in all respects – indeed, the ransoms demanded can be US\$10,000 for one person. It goes without saying that the Chinese war fleet does not really feel so threatened by dirt-poor Vietnamese fisherfolk that such military action would be required, even if the islands in question were indisputably Chinese; it further goes without question that the mighty Chinese navy does not need these ransoms as a fundraiser. There is one reason for these actions: to humiliate, to show who is boss. And that is the kind of action that becomes necessary when a large capitalist power, such as China, begins to develop into a new imperial power in its own right. While that is another more complex issue, it is clearly related and ultimately is a question that will need to be confronted.

In any case, there is clearly going to be no “sharing” of any resources as long as China has its way, because that is a socialist concept, utterly foreign to the current Chinese leadership.

Now all that does not mean – to knock out a red herring – that socialists in the West should start launching public campaigns against “Chinese imperialism”, that we should be putting “Down with China!” on the front pages of our newspapers and campaigning in the streets. Our main enemy is at home, and in as much as Australia is connected to US imperialism, our key focus will always be – as it always has been – denouncing and exposing US imperialism. Note, of course, that in Australia’s case, our ruling class is somewhat more equidistant between the US and China, so it’s not that simple, but still is basically with the US. And all this also assumes some great clash between the US and China, which in my opinion is also overstated – there is clearly rivalry, but also a great deal of cooperation.

Nevertheless, the main point remains – denouncing China is hardly our main public concern. And for the record, though China may be morphing into an emerging imperial power in its own right, I would still strongly defend China from any direct attack by US imperialism.

– ‘Sinophobia’?

However, socialists are allowed to discuss our views on things that do not go on the front covers of our campaign material, in order to understand the world. Yet there has been a certain reaction from some quarters of the left to even discussing the issue; simply to do so can be greeted with accusations of “Sinophobia” (in the same way that any criticism of Israel is labelled by Zionists “anti-Semitism”) or of being unwitting servants of US imperialism. This way of thinking is often referred to as “Manichean”, that is, a biblical view whereby the world is divided into Good and Bad, so if it happens that some tyrannical capitalist regime falls out of favour with US imperialism for reasons having nothing to do with anything progressive, then such a regime is seen as having a silver lining, and criticism of it is henceforth banned. Such views are an embarrassment to those spouting them and an affront to socialism, and reflect an inability to cope with “complex” ideas such as Marxist analysis.

However, Manicheans can often get away with it by posing as thus being “anti-imperialist holier-than-thou” in an attempt to shut up their critics (e.g., “How dare you criticise Milosevic or Mugabe or the Burmese junta when US imperialism is also against them” etc., and other such arguments). But the problem for them in this case is that, since they have now decided that China’s current rivalry with the US makes everything China does Good, they find themselves in a most uncomfortable situation of being in direct opposition to the martyr socialist nation Vietnam, which waged the longest anti-imperialist war in history; a nation that they would also prefer not to criticise. Because it is none other than Vietnam – not capitalist Indonesia, Malaysia or elsewhere – that is in the front of the firing line of the implications of capitalist China’s growing emergence as an

imperial power.

It must be a rather uncomfortable position to be in to feel forced to choose between two countries that many of these people consider to be socialist, let alone siding with the position of the one that is far richer, far more powerful on a world scale, and the one that has violated Vietnam's sovereignty numerous times in the past, usually in open collaboration with imperialism. Indeed, China invaded Vietnam in the recent past with the direct support of US imperialism. China is currently moving its capital all over the developing world and replicating typically exploitative patterns well-worn by the imperialist powers before it. It must also be a rather uncomfortable position to be to stand with China against the position of a weak, bombed-back-to-the-stone-age, developing socialist country, even though Beijing is the first to militarise the conflict and push greater-power nationalism, while Vietnam is opposed to such militarisation and is trying to contain the partially justified local nationalism rising over the issue.

So keep this context in mind as we now analyse the actual issue in dispute.

Debate

One way of dealing with this problem is to pretend it does not exist and hope it goes away. A more unique way was recently presented on the Green Left discussion list [2]. This was to openly take China's position in the dispute, but in order to avoid the Vietnam elephant in the room, to also pretend that the Vietnamese government agrees with China's view! While one particular post to a discussion list may be of little consequence, it is useful to quote it as an example of the problem while introducing some of the propaganda put out by the Chinese regime. The post read in part:

"As for all your smoke and mirrors and pretend concern for the"poor Vietnamese fishermen" it would be more useful if you had looked for the views of the Vietnamese government itself on the subject of the Xisha and Nansha Islands.

Nhan Dan of Viet Nam reported in great detail on September 6, 1958, the Chinese Government's Declaration of September 4, 1958, that the breadth of the territorial sea of the People's Republic of China should be 12 nautical miles and that this provision should apply to all territories of the People's Republic of China, including all islands on the South China Sea. On September 14 the same year, Premier Pham Van Dong of the Vietnamese Government solemnly stated in his note to Premier Zhou Enlai that Viet Nam "recognizes and supports the Declaration of the Government of the People's Republic of China on China's territorial sea".

It is somewhat extraordinary that in order to "prove" such an absurd proposition, someone would quote what they think a Vietnamese prime minister said in 1958, 52 years ago, as evidence of the Vietnamese government's view. But it is not so absurd when we consider that the poster got this quote from a Chinese propaganda site, and the reason the Chinese site needs to go back to 1958 is that there is simply nothing else in the intervening years to quote.

I will spare readers even a single quote from any Vietnamese government or Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) declaration from 2010, or 2000, or 1990, or 1980, or 1970 or any other time, because anyone who wants to know Vietnam's view on the two island groups only has to Google for a minute or so to understand why the poster in question had to go back as far as 1958 to find a quote he thought justified his assertion.

But anyway, let's now look at the propaganda itself, as an introduction to the development of the issue in the modern era.

Yes, China did make that declaration on September 4, 1958. Yes, Vietnamese prime minister Pham Van Dong did make that diplomatic reply 10 days later. I have the whole text of the reply. Yes, it supports China extending its territorial waters to 12 miles. But the reply studiously avoids saying anything about that part of the contents of the Chinese declaration which defines China's territory as including the Hoang Sa and Truong Sa. For the sake of clarity, the islands are hundreds of miles away from China, so are not covered by China's 12-mile territorial water boundaries, that is a separate issue; it just happens that the Chinese government used this declaration to push both issues. The non-mention of this part of China's declaration in Pham Van Dong's letter is very significant.

Nevertheless, why would Pham Van Dong write this diplomatic letter in such a way that has enabled both Chinese, and as we will see below, Vietnamese chauvinists and reactionaries to use it against Vietnam and the CPV? First we need to understand the context.

Context

In 1954, under massive Soviet and Chinese pressure, the CPV government in Hanoi signed the Geneva Accords, temporarily dividing Vietnam into north and south, with the proviso that elections would be held in 1956 to reunify the country. If the division had been drawn at where the actual forces on the ground had stopped fighting, the CPV-led (Vietminh) forces would have had about three-quarters of the country, not half. By 1956, the US and the puppet Diem regime installed in the south had cancelled the elections because it knew it would have resulted in an overwhelming vote for the CPV across both north and south.

These Geneva Accords defined Vietnamese territory as *including both the Hoang Sa and the Truong Sa island groups*. These accords were *signed by China*. Thus the last actual international treaty signed by both Vietnam and China on this issue clearly defined these island groups as Vietnamese. This is thus the standing international law. The reason both island groups were declared part of Vietnam's territory was because they were part of the Vietnam colony of French imperialism, which had just been defeated by the Vietminh in 1954. The reason they were part of the French colony of Vietnam was not because France had conquered them from some mythical Chinese rule in the 19th century but, on the contrary, because the two island groups were a well-established part of Vietnam's Nguyen Dynasty long before the arrival of the French, and the islands' resources had been exploited by Vietnam's Hoang Sa company since the 18th century. So France naturally got them by invading Vietnam. This is the modern history of the islands. As for whether Chinese maritime expeditions in the islands from the time of the "Song Dynasty" some 1000 years ago can be said to constitute some mythical prior Chinese "sovereignty" will be touched on in the section below on nationalism.

Getting back to the 20th century, the two archipelagos were put under the temporary control of "south Vietnam" in 1954. Once the US/Saigon cancelled the elections and launched barbarous attacks on the CPV-led Vietminh forces in the south, forcing the latter to re-launch the struggle some years later, the new CPV-led formations (in the south), the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) and National Liberation Front (NLF), declared their aim to be the liberation of the whole territory of "south Vietnam" as defined in Geneva. They never said anything about giving part of their territory to China.

However, in the late 1950s, just as the US/Diem regime was resuming its aggression in the south, backed by US arms and "advisors", China sent its navy to seize the eastern part of the Hoang Sa, despite its signature at Geneva. Incidentally, at the same time Taiwan also laid claim to the islands

and moved in and seized one of the larger islands in the Truong Sa – China and Taiwan may have been enemies, but preying on a weakened Vietnam was something they had in common.

Under this two-pronged pressure, Vietnam, seeing imperialism as its main enemy, wanted to soften things with China by not openly confronting it over its seizure of these islands; thus Dong's letter simply avoided the issue.

But since US imperialism was also confronting China in this period, the Vietnamese government was completely sincere in agreeing with China's extension of its territorial waters to 12 miles as a protective measure – thus Dong's letter was not just diplomatic, but an act of solidarity, despite China's clear lack of solidarity in seizing the islands while Vietnam was at war with imperialism and putting its renewed claim to the islands into this same declaration. Vietnam refused to play by the rules of anti-solidaristic Maoist tradition.

US-China anti-Vietnam alliance

China's military conquest of the western part of the Hoang Sa in 1974 was even worse. Just as the most barbarous war against any country in history was coming to a close, and following US President Richard Nixon's famous trip to Beijing at the height of the US genocide against Vietnam to announce the Maoist regime's cynical betrayal, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger met with China's leaders. Given that by late 1974 it was clear to the US that Saigon would fall, and socialist Vietnam would thus inherit the islands, Kissinger gave the green light to "socialist" China to launch a full-scale military attack on the positions of his capitalist Saigon allies in the western Hoang Sa. So Chinese and Vietnamese troops were killed as part of a Machiavellian plan to prevent the coming unified socialist Vietnam from controlling the islands, and to kick sand in Hanoi's face.

This US-China anti-Vietnam alliance stepped up in the second half of the 1970s and 1980s (including China's 1979 invasion of Vietnam and joint US-Chinese backing of the genocidal Khmer Rouge's war against Vietnam and the Cambodian people), and it incorporated all the US-backed capitalist military dictatorships of South-East Asia in an effort to strangle the Vietnamese revolution. In this context, first the Philippines in the late 1970s and early 1980s, then Malaysia in the mid-1980s, also militarily seized eight islands and three islands respectively of the Truong Sa (Spratleys) from Vietnam, while Taiwan also re-stated its claims. Then, in 1988, China again launched a full-scale naval attack against socialist Vietnam and seized six islands of the Truong Sa.

At present, the whole of the Hoang Sa is under Chinese occupation, while Vietnam controls most of the Truong Sa (21 islands), China controls six islands, the Philippines eight, Malaysia three and Taiwan one.

Vietnam's reaction: Stand firm, but avoid nationalism

What then of Vietnam's reaction to all this? Is Vietnam similarly just beating nationalist drums over a bunch of rocks? In fact, if we go back to the last paragraph quoted above from the Greg Torode article on the Chinese navy's kidnapping of Vietnamese fisherfolk, we read:

*"Vietnam's Foreign Ministry has lodged formal protests while its state press, a less sophisticated but equally unsubtle variant of the mainland model, has churned out tales of woe from grieving relatives waiting for news. Under pressure from annoyed Chinese diplomats, **Vietnamese government officials have tried to keep nationalistic tensions from spilling over into street protests.**"*

The indicates how differently Vietnam reacts - trying to keep down the nationalistic reaction - despite the massively greater provocation compared with the detention of a single Chinese captain by Japan, which produced a highly nationalistic response from the Chinese government. *This difference regarding nationalism is a class difference.*

And that is why I also oppose the “dissident” Vietnamese opposition. Indeed, going back to the famous Pham Van Dong letter of 1958, the distortion of this letter by Chinese propaganda mirrors the exact same distortion of it by right-wing Vietnamese “dissidents” and overseas reactionaries, who for years now have been campaigning for Vietnam to take a “tougher line” with China over the islands, and claim that the CPV is a “puppet” of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and a betrayer of Vietnam (wow, they should talk). They also seize on this letter to justify their views on alleged CPV treachery.

But since the CPV in fact continually and unambiguously claims the islands are Vietnamese, the only thing the right wing can really be objecting to is the Vietnamese government’s other view, that there is no military solution. The “dissidents” have thus turned themselves into the national chauvinist camp and are essentially advocating war with China. The difference between China and Vietnam on this issue is not so much who is right or wrong on the legal issues, but rather the fact that the equivalent of these Vietnamese chauvinists are already in power in Beijing.

They are playing the nationalist card because it is now available. Some sections of the “dissidents” are even ridiculously calling for a boycott of Chinese goods! However, this nationalist sentiment is being made available to the “dissidents” by China’s actions, as well as many of its exploitative investment practices inside Vietnam and other issues. *It is not only the islands.* China has become a major investor in Vietnam, and like other foreign capitalist investors, many investments show little regard for any social or environmental concerns. Like other investors, Chinese businesses develop special financial relations with certain politicians and sections of the state and government to push their business interests. That makes them no different to any other, but the fact that China is a giant neighbour with a history of aggression against Vietnam and a current bad policy on the islands tends to make Vietnamese more leery of the Chinese variety, however “unfair” that may seem to some well-meaning Western anti-imperialists.

In terms of labour, Chinese investors, like elsewhere in the Third World, import an army of skilled Chinese workers, leaving only jobs like sweepers for the Vietnamese, thus even the usual “employment gains” or skills development associated with foreign investment are largely missing. Chinese bosses in Vietnam openly say they prefer their own workers - who they can keep barrack-style away from Vietnamese labour laws - to “lazy” and “undisciplined” Vietnamese workers, i.e., workers who are more likely to strike and less likely to take shit from the boss than the imported workers, who are totally dependent on the bosses.

Also China’s massive damming of the upper reaches of the Mekong River in China itself, and also in Laos, Burma and Cambodia, is having a dramatic effect on downstream agriculture, and the most downstream is Vietnam’s Mekong rice bowl.

In a recent conversation with a friend who has a relative in the border police, a marked change of attitude of Chinese police in recent years was reported. A big problem in Vietnam is the smuggling of women and children to China. The guard reports a markedly reduced level of cooperation - Vietnam tells the Chinese police exactly which village a girl has been taken to, but the Chinese side at best brings back the girl but does nothing about the criminals responsible, who are sometimes found trying to re-enter Vietnam; at worst Chinese police do not even rescue the girl.

Exaggerations? Perhaps? Anecdotal? Perhaps? But we need to recognise in such stories real feelings and beliefs among Vietnamese that are not entirely baseless. My friend’s point was not that Chinese

police are evil and approve of this horrible trade. It was that this marked change of attitude to any honest and equal cooperation with Vietnamese police – like the deliberate and pointless humiliation at sea – was an attitude that reflects the rise of an imperial power that needs to demonstrate who is boss.

Ecological destruction fuels hostility

A major issue now is the massive bauxite-aluminium development in Vietnam's central highlands, which is set to destroy the ecology of this region and wreck the lives of the ethnic minorities who live there. There is massive opposition in Vietnam to this development, including from many prominent scientists, from many in the National Assembly, from sections of the army and CPV, and from people more generally. No less than General Vo Nguyen Giap has written three open letters to the Vietnamese government protesting this development. Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, of 1972 Paris negotiations fame, has also signed one of the many petitions against it.

The foreign investor responsible is a huge Chinese company. In my opinion, that in itself should be irrelevant. The objection is environmental; it matters not which foreign investors are involved, and the Vietnamese state mining company is the local partner in any case. However, the nature of Chinese company labour practices described above has given an extra "security" angle to all this – the central highlands have vast strategic significance, being the region where the US-backed southern regime was decisively defeated in 1974-75. With China's generally aggressive stance, having thousands of Chinese skilled workers barracked in the region under Chinese bosses with little or no reference to Vietnamese authorities has raised alarm bells.

Now I have something of a problem with this; it bends a little in the nationalist direction I am opposed to; and the "dissident" right wing is exploiting the issue. However, General Giap is not someone who can easily be classified as a simple-minded anti-China nationalist – his main objection is environmental, having been a strong partisan of the environment since the 1980s – but he has also spoken out on the "security" aspect, reflecting a widespread apprehension among war veterans, and the fact of his opinion is reason enough to at least take it seriously.

It is the Vietnamese government that is trying to contain all the popular nationalism associated with all these issues, which has some justice as its basis due to China's actions, but which also has an ugly and reactionary potential of its own, like the kind now ruling China. Far from using the islands to promote an opposing nationalism, the Vietnamese government has, if anything, tended to overreact against this current, arresting countless bloggers and the like who peacefully spread their anti-China views, rather than confronting them politically. The government has also prevented anti-China demonstrations (in contrast to the weeks of anti-US demonstrations at the outset of the invasion of Iraq), and is still going out of its way to cultivate close political, economic, military and ideological relations with its powerful northern neighbour despite China's open cynicism in these relations.

For example, when another poster on the Green Left discussion list tried to paint the recent visit by a US warship to Vietnam as the beginning of a US-Vietnam anti-China alliance, I was able to point to the absurdity of this by showing that, despite China's aggressiveness, Vietnam has carried out nine full-scale sets of military naval manoeuvres with the Chinese navy in the region in recent years, all much more fully military exercises than the symbolic search and rescue exercise (and bi-cultural cooking lessons) on the US ship. Vietnam certainly has the right to manoeuvre, but the US ship visit was but one minor aspect of this; its far greater relations with China itself are also a necessary manoeuvre in its own way; and buying advanced military submarines from Russia, giving Russia the

contract to build Vietnam's first nuclear plant, and choosing Russian consultants and Russian technology to develop the former US base of Cam Ranh Bay into a service centre to repair submarines and civil and military vessels, represent another angle, that are likewise inconsistent with becoming a US ally.

There is plenty to criticise the Vietnamese government for, but its stance on this issue is not one of them.

Nationalism and class: National chauvinism of a rising imperial power

Which leads to me to a point about nationalism and class. Nationalism, in my admittedly harsh opinion, is the ideology of the bourgeoisie, and is essentially anti-working class and anti-internationalist, except when there is a genuine national struggle against oppression and *only* in as much as such "nationalism of the oppressed" *temporarily* aids that struggle and *no further*.

Internationalism is the ideology compatible with socialism. We have seen time and again that when nations have thrown off their failed bureaucratic state socialist projects, the emergent bourgeoisie has tended to adopt nationalism as its ideology, feeling the need for an ideology to preserve some kind of cross-class "national unity" when the old socialist and internationalist ideology is no longer relevant, and their class interests can no longer be contained even with the pretense of official socialist ideology. As 20 years of market socialism were coming to an end in the Yugoslav federation in the mid-1980s, we saw first the rise of a primitive, aggressive bourgeois national chauvinism in the dominant nation, Serbia, and soon after in the second most dominant nation, Croatia, both being expressions of the capitalist class that had arisen out of market socialism.

The fact that China is more advanced along the capitalist path than Vietnam is, in my opinion, reflected in this more aggressive nationalist position of the Chinese leadership, in sharp contrast to the Vietnamese CP's attempt to battle this nationalism in Vietnam.

In 2006, this need to build a reactionary nationalism to replace socialism as a unifying ideology – when socialism has become irrelevant – was explained in unusually stark terms in an official Chinese journal, *China and World Affairs*, by Lin Zhibo, a deputy director of the commentary department of the official People's Daily. This is from the WSWS site [3], which I wouldn't usually quote, but as this is direct from the Chinese journal, it speaks for itself. First, regarding the paroxysm of chauvinism in both China and Japan in 2005, when Chinese mobs attacked Japanese civilian property in China in response to Japan's fascistic revisionism about WWII in its textbooks, he wrote:

*"Our one-sided efforts at friendship [with Japan] have been totally useless. Chinese-Japanese relations will be better handled only if China's stance is tougher than now. **It's not a totally bad thing to have an enemy country.** Mencius [the ancient Chinese philosopher] said, "Without foes and external threats, a state will surely perish". Having an enemy country and external peril forces us to strengthen ourselves."*

But if that wasn't bad enough, Lin Zhibo got even more theoretical about it, noting that, in the context of growing social inequality and the fact that the Communist Party can no longer claim to be socialist:

"Today in China an ideological vacuum is emerging. What can China rely on for cohesion? I believe that apart from nationalism, there is no other recourse."

This rising bourgeois nationalism was evident not only in that conflict with Japan, but also, several

months ago, in a similar mass event, over — ironically enough — the Japanese capture of one Chinese national in other islands disputed between Japan and China discussed above, and especially in the anti-Tibetan hysteria over the issue of the Olympic torch, when the whole of the bourgeois Chinese “dissident” blogosphere, which would normally be anti-CCP, swung into full “national” mood right behind the CCP.

Before concluding, I just want to extend the discussion of nationalism a little. The Chinese propaganda quoted above, apart from referring to the famous Pham Van Dong letter of 1958, also made the following claim:

“Vice Foreign Minister Dung Van Khiem of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam received Mr. Li Zhimin, charge d’affaires ad interim of the Chinese Embassy in Viet Nam and told him that”according to Vietnamese data, the Xisha and Nansha Islands are historically part of Chinese territory.“Mr. Le Doc, Acting Director of the Asian Department of the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry, who was present then, added that”judging from history, these islands were already part of China at the time of the Song Dynasty.”

Now I can find no references to judge whether this is even true, and nor is there any reference to which decade these alleged statements were made. However, the reference to the “Democratic Republic of Vietnam” suggests this was during the war years, when Vietnamese diplomats may have felt the need to be over-diplomatic to China at times. So let’s just assume the statements did in fact happen.

First, being “historically” part of Chinese territory has no meaning. Southern Vietnam was “historically” part of Cambodia, the empire of Angkor, in the 13th century. Vietnam itself was “historically” part of China, for a cool 1000 years up to around 1000 AD. Thus that diplomatic nicety was in fact saying nothing. Moreover, the second statement further stresses this point; by referring to the Song Dynasty, of some 1000 years ago, Le Doc was able to trivialise the Chinese claim while appearing to be diplomatic about it.

Let’s be clear: even in the Song Dynasty, the main evidence is Chinese maritime expeditions in the islands. That tells us nothing about any “sovereignty” of the Chinese empire at the time. Clearly, Chinese people never settled the islands. In any case, there are many Chinese maps over the last 1000 years which show the southern end of China’s border to be the large Chinese island of Hai Nam, and not including either island archipelago. Even the vague Chinese references that could be interpreted as showing a Chinese claim cease in the second half of the last millennium.

But in the end, so what? If Chinese maritime expeditions, or even maps, from the Song Dynasty of 1000 years ago make the islands part of China today, and if Chinese rule over Tibet for several hundred years over the last millennium mean Tibet must be subjugated forever, does not this also mean that 1000 years of Chinese rule over Vietnam gives China a claim to sovereignty over Vietnam? And that is precisely the problem with “historical” nonsense being dredged up to justify territorial claims, aggression and occupation today: they are irrational and obscurantist, and are generally only used by right-wing nationalist regimes to justify rule in regions where they have no business.

Thus references to the “Song Dynasty” remind one of Mussolini’s references to the Roman Empire to justify fascist aggression around the Mediterranean, of the Zionist movement’s references to the Kingdom of David and Solomon to justify the occupation of Palestine, of the Greek nationalist obsession with the empire of Alexander the Great to deny the rights of Macedonians today, of the Serbian nationalists’ obsession with a battle waged by a brief Serbian empire in the 1300s against the Ottomans to justify the occupation of Kosovo, of the Khmer Rouge’s raising of the ghost of

Angkor to justify its claims and aggression against Vietnam's Mekong region, of Hindu fanatics' obsession with some temple that was turned into a mosque hundreds of years ago, which they destroyed in the 1990s with catastrophic consequences for all. The list is only short. So much for the "Song Dynasty" argument.

The big picture

There is of course a bigger picture to all this, which includes the fact that there is likely to be oil in the region of these islands; and US-China rivalry in the Asian region, which includes the question of who dominates the seaways of the region, though at this stage it is important to understand that no one is actually blocking anyone else in what are mostly international waters. Even if China's claim to both island groups as a whole were acted upon, it would not block any ship beyond the 12 miles of territorial waters around them. US imperialism undoubtedly has an interest in trying to contain China's rise, and as such is maneuvering with the ASEAN states, including Vietnam. Socialists and anti-imperialists oppose any US intervention into this conflict, which can only heighten tensions, and which is only motivated by its own imperialist interests. Indeed, it would tend to heighten tensions precisely by inflaming Chinese nationalism, whose first victim would be Vietnam.

However, there is a big difference between opposing US intervention in the conflict and taking a reflexive "pro-China" position on the issues that divide China from other countries in South-East Asia, especially Vietnam. This is where Manichean "anti-imperialism" has ended up: as China is now seen as a balance to US imperialism, even if its main conflict is not with pro-US regimes in the region but with socialist martyr Vietnam, a tendency emerges to "support China", whatever that means, in this conflict.

This is a very wrong and anti-internationalist way of viewing the issue. However, beyond this, if there really is such significant rivalry between the US and China, as many now describe - and while real, I tend to find it exaggerated - then that begs the question of the nature of this rivalry: is this just the US trying to contain a large capitalist power, to keep it in its place, as we see elsewhere (e.g., Iran), or is it incipient inter-imperialist rivalry? It is well to remember how rapidly imperialist states rose in the past: it would have been inconceivable in 1870, when Germany and Italy had only just been unified, when Japan had only just emerged from a long sleep with the Meiji restoration, when feudal Russia had only just freed the serfs, that by 1900 these would all be major imperialist powers (and in Russia's case, with a peasant population bigger than that still existing in China today). I have no firm opinion on this, but I believe signs exist that suggest such a scenario is not out of the question and should not be out of bounds of left discussion.

By Michael Karadjis

Resources

Here are a few articles worth considering in the context of my final remarks.

"Made in China", <http://www.newint.org/features/2009/06/01/keynote-china/>, about what appears to be exploitation in Papua New Guinea of a typically imperialist nature.

"China and Rio Tinto in Guinea: A Wild Courtship",
<http://www.chinaafricarealstory.com/2010/03/china-and-rio-tinto-in-guinea-wild.html>.

"Dam building equates to neo colonialism",
<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2010/12/21/opinion/Dam-building-equates-to-neo-colonialism-3014>

[4817.html](#).

“Chinas billions reap rewards in Cambodia”,
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/20/AR2010112003850_pf.html.

“Zambia Uneasily Balances Chinese Investment and Workers Resentment”,
www.nytimes.com/2010/11/21/world/africa/21zambia.html.

“China Squeezes Foreigners for Share of Global Riches”,
<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203731004576045684068308042.html>.

P.S.

* From Links:
<http://links.org.au/node/2145>

Footnotes

- [1] See on ESSF: [China, Japan & Vietnam: Double standards](#)
- [2] http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GreenLeft_discussion/
- [3] http://www.wsws.org/articles/2006/mar2006/cha2-m10_prn.shtml